

Rating the Packers vs Eagles

Packers catch the breaks

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay — The Packers fumbled four times and lost two, squandered a certain touchdown when James Jones dropped the ball and for the first time all season didn't have a pass play worth more than 20 yards.

In other words, the Eagles caught the Packers on a good day just as the Packers caught a break when one of the game's great kickers, David Akers, missed field-goal attempts from 41 and 34 yards.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 21-16 wild-card playoff victory over Philadelphia, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (2)

Coordinator Sean McDermott built his plan around preventing the long ball to Greg Jennings (53 snaps). Keeping both safeties back helped James Starks run wild, but it did take Jennings out of the game. Jennings caught just one of the five passes thrown his way, and a harsh grader might have given him two drops. On the other side, Donald Driver (33) cavorted through zones for five catches, including four for first downs. He moved fluidly before departing with a knee injury at the 11-minute mark. Jones (24) tucked his elbows tightly together and made a big-league scoop in the corner for a 9-yard TD. Then he dropped his ninth pass of 2010; two weeks ago against the Giants he botched what would have been a 71-yard TD. It'll be fascinating to see if GM Ted Thompson even offers him a new contract. On two running plays Andrew Quarless played patty-cake with MLB Jamar Chaney and the rookie shoved him aside to make the tackle. Maybe that's the "rookie wall" that Quarless talked about last week.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4)

Chad Clifton has had his share of ups and downs in this, his 11th season. Still, when Clifton feels threatened and really wants to play, he might be as good as any LT. The Packers were extremely worried about DE Trent Cole, the Eagles' one legitimate pass rusher. Clifton allayed their fears, frustrating Cole to no end with little or no help. Clifton did miss a cut-off block or two in the run game. So what else is new? He's paid to neutralize the big-money DEs, and neutralize Cole he did. Scott Wells continues to make difficult blocks and game management look easy. He also hasn't had an errant shotgun snap all year. This was one of Daryn Colledge's better games. Partially because of Wells' ability to reach and snatch, Colledge was able to get out quicker. Then he showed improvement sustaining blocks. Other than Darryl Tapp's strip-sack, Colledge was sharp in protection, too. Bryan Bulaga got walked back a few times by DE Juqua Parker, a veteran with uncommonly good leverage. But he usually stayed in front of his man and allowed just one hurry.

QUARTERBACKS (4)

McDermott blitzed a little less (34.5% on passes) than he did in the opener (39%), but Rodgers' ability to read and react properly limited the rush to two sacks, one knockdown and one hurry. On one of the two instances when the Eagles rushed seven, Rodgers knew he didn't have the people to block it and calmly stepped through the left side for 8 yards on third and 5. On one of the Eagles' six-man pressures, he simply swung the ball to John Kuhn in the flat for 8. On Jones' TD, he had nothing going, but a pump-fake enabled him to buy time for the throw. The dropped passes undoubtedly are wearing on Rodgers, but it has been a while since he showed anyone up with his reaction. Rodgers throws the ball with such precision that it's almost a surprise when he's inaccurate. He had three or four wild ones but stayed in control and won his first playoff game.

RUNNING BACKS (1 ½)

James Starks (32 snaps) played at 215 pounds, down 10 from just a few weeks ago. The rookie admitted to not always eating properly, but you wouldn't have known it by his stalwart performance. Chaney's arm tackle that Starks ran through 3 yards downfield probably stops Brandon Jackson (15). When Starks then shifted and altered his course just a bit, FS Kurt Coleman whiffed and the play ruptured into 27 yards. Starks is plenty fast enough and he is no straight-liner. He kept his eyes downfield, made subtle cuts in daylight and kept plunging forward on contact. When he missed a read and went wide right, at least he then had the presence of mind to stick his foot in the ground, get north-south and gain 2 on his 16th carry. The Eagles have an undersized D-line, lousy LBs and played seven in the box, an ideal combination for Starks to exploit. He looked natural as a receiver, too. Other than his third-and-1 fumble, John Kuhn (30) played well splitting time evenly between RB and FB. A miscue by Quinn Johnson (30) caused a collision with Rodgers and subsequent fumble. Johnson is on the stiff side and plays too high, but he's so strong that he still manages to cover up LBs.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)

Playing with a strained groin, LG Todd Herremans was pushed back and around early by B.J. Raji (45 snaps) before he started getting his pads down. With Howard Green inactive for the first time, the Packers went with C.J. Wilson (19) and Jarius Wynn (13) behind Ryan Pickett (25) and Cullen Jenkins (31). The unit followed orders, adhered to rush-lane integrity and kept Michael Vick contained. It was just the opposite of when Vick used to sprint under Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila. Nobody since the Cowboys' Leonard Davis back a few years has ever moved Pickett on a consistent basis. Jenkins returned after a four-game absence (calf) and didn't do much.

LINEBACKERS (4 ½)

Eagles coach Andy Reid benched RT Winston Justice right after Clay Matthews beat him to tackle LeSean McCoy for no gain on third and 1. Before that, Matthews beat his former USC teammate for two hurries and a knockdown. Both Matthews and Desmond Bishop were so sharp on their blitz angles that when Vick tried to reverse-spin away, they still wrapped him up. Bishop's limitations in space showed up on two missed tackles. However, after Charlie Peprah missed the tackle against DeSean Jackson 4 yards downfield on a late check-down, Bishop made what might have been a season-saving tackle after a 28-yard gain. Erik Walden didn't get anywhere against LT Jason Peters as a rusher and isn't as stout as Frank Zombo at the point. But when McCoy was running too recklessly Walden had the focus to strip him. A.J. Hawk was fine. You'd just like to see him respond quicker to the Eagles' tight splits and attack Vick faster on his fourth-down TD sneak.

SECONDARY (4)

On the second series, Reid called a deep bootleg pass in which Jeremy Maclin started out by dilly-dallying on the other side, hoping Sam Shields would be suckered into inattentiveness. Two months ago, Shields might have been looking in the backfield and, given Vick's perfect throw, been scalded by Maclin for a 79-yard TD. Instead, Shields kept his eyes on Maclin, broke when he broke and mirrored him to the point 46 yards downfield where the ball arrived and then poked it away. What a play that was. Peprah and Charles Woodson each missed two tackles, and Nick Collins wasn't in real good position on Maclin's 44-yard in route against Tramon Williams. Otherwise, Williams had the game-ending pick and basically shut his man down. He's become remarkably effective breaking on the ball in off coverage. Woodson wants to win so badly, he actually exposed his ribs clawing to get at Vick on one of his nine pressures. McCoy hurt Woodson with a shoulder to the gut, but he was right back battling on the next series. How could that toughness not inspire teammates? Dime back Jarrett Bush had his feet frozen by Jason Avant's stutter and then had no chance trailing in Cover-2 to prevent a 24-yard TD.

KICKERS (3 ½)

Tim Masthay had to stand on the field for the entire 2-minute break knowing the dynamic Jackson was awaiting his punt. Masthay then got off a 41-yard boot with hang time of 4.76 seconds, his best in the last 27 punts. That's clutch. His four-punt averages were 36.5 (gross), 32.8 (net) and 4.26 (hang time). Average hang time for Philly's Sav Rocca was 3.59. Mason Crosby's three deep kickoffs averaged 71.7 (yards) and 3.99 (hang time).

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Pat Lee looked good last week returning kickoffs. You wonder why the Packers would go back to Shields, who stopped running as aggressively as Lee a month ago. Shields went sideways for 9 on his only attempt. Starks also ran one back. The special teams' third lost fumble of 2010 occurred when Brandon Underwood showed a glaring lack of awareness very, very late on a punt and was pushed into the ball by S Colt Anderson. Bush and Lee made some fine plays in coverage.

OVERALL (4)

PLAYER OF THE WEEK: T Chad Clifton

DE Trent Cole, the Eagles' talented and relentless pass rusher, talked a great game during the week about the disruption that he and his teammates intended to cause. Cole met his match in Clifton, who never let him get close to a sack.

PLAY OF THE WEEK

Late fourth quarter. Clock is running. First and 10 at the GB 27. Packers lead, 21-16. On the previous play, WR Riley Cooper caught a third-and-10 slant against Tramon Williams for 11. Out of timeouts, several Eagle players said they expected Michael Vick to spike the ball. Instead, Vick hustles the team to the line, calls vertical routes for his four WRs and flanks Cooper wide left against Williams, Jeremy Maclin slot left Desmond Bishop, Jason Avant slot right against Charles Woodson and DeSean Jackson wide right against Sam Shields. The shotgun snap is made with 44 seconds left. It's the fifth play of the drive, the Packers look tired and their four-man rush seems more concerned with containment and offers no threat. Maclin slices into the middle, where he is open at the 15. Vick pump fakes, turns and 3.3 seconds after the snap throws deep to Cooper. The rookie, who stands 6-3 ½, has taken an outside release on Williams as they run downfield side-by-side. Near the 10, Cooper begins to slow. Williams, who is turned toward Cooper, glances back and sees the ball. It's an in-between throw, neither flat nor arcing. Both leap three yards into the end zone, but Williams is in perfect position and intercepts the ball high above his head in front of Cooper. When Cooper doesn't even touch him down, Williams returns it to the 4. The Packers take a knee on the next play and the game is over.

STAT OF THE WEEK

RB James Starks gains 123 yards in 23 carries. Counting regular season and playoffs, it's the most rushing yards by a Green Bay rookie since John Brockington gained 23-149 at Minnesota in Week 9 of 1971. Brockington had four 100-yard games as a rookie: 19-120, 16-111 and 30-142. Since 1960, just five other rookie Packers gained more than 100 yards in a game: Tom Moore, 11-105 ('60); Steve Atkins, 12-110 ('79); Edgar Bennett, 29-107 ('92); De'Mond Parker, 19-113 ('99); and Brandon Jackson, 20-113 ('07).

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